

**Who to Blame This Pandemic On:**

**A Qualitative Study of the Politicization of COVID-19 through Political Memes in Canada**

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***Abstract:***

Memes are a curious object of study, easy to identify but harder to contextualize. Working with the growing literature on the study of memes and their communities, our paper offers a method to study the shared values or stories worked out and maintained by memes that Whitney Phillip and Ryan Milner describe as a “deep memetic frames.” Our interest is less on the individual memes than how memes accumulate and help communities express their own ways of interpreting events. One of these events has been the COVID-19 pandemic. We developed our method while studying how Canadian partisan groups – or what we call scenes – reacted to the pandemic. Was the pandemic a chance for partisans to make peace or recontextualize politics over a health crisis? Through researcher journals, team meetings, and observational notes, we evaluated the use of memes across 14 Canadian partisan communities on Facebook and Instagram during the 2020 summer of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Our approach extracts three distinct partisan scenes: established partisan, negative partisan, and emergent right-wing populism. We focus on their memetic contexts to evaluate the central themes of understanding, extract the worldviews that maintain these digital spaces, and construct a deeper comprehension of memetic frames. As a term widely used but challenging to study, we recognize this research as a novel approach and conclude by discussing its utility for researchers more broadly and acknowledging its limitations while providing the various research directions this work offers.

***Keywords:*** memes; methods; politics; framing; qualitative social media; partisanship; COVID-19

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Two years into the pandemic, memes are an everyday way to cope with a global pandemic. Jokes about masks, hand washing, and government policies are just some of the examples of humorous or satirical texts circulating online about the pandemic (Dyner, 2020). Memes, or what we understand as evolving self-referential texts (Milner, 2016), have already proven to be a popular format for sharing misinformation and disinformation about the virus (Brennen et al., 2020). We add to a growing body of scholarship analyzing the networked publics producing memes about COVID-19 (Varnelis, 2008). Where Abidin (2020) studied the East Asian “meme factories” that pivoted early in the pandemic to produce COVID-19 memes, we study how pre-existing political networked publics responded to the pandemic. Memes maintain political networked publics’ structures of feeling (Papacharissi, 2015) and have become a part of political movements globally (Milner, 2016; Mina, 2019; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018). Meme production in Canada is highly political with many memes originating from partisan Facebook and Instagram accounts (Lalancette et al., 2019; Lalancette & Small, 2020; McKelvey et al., 2021). Guiding our work, we ask how did Canadian political meme-makers respond to the COVID-19 pandemic? Was the public health emergency a moment of consensus or partisanship?

Through a novel qualitative method inspired by netnography, we observed Canadian political Instagram accounts, Facebook pages, and Facebook groups that shared memes over the 2020 summer to study their reaction to COVID-19. These groups, identified during prior research, were active online before the pandemic. By qualitatively observing these pages and groups, we found that their deep memetic frames or older “ideological ways of seeing” interpreted the COVID-19 pandemic differently (Phillips & Milner, 2021). Beyond party loyalties, we define three frames expressed in memetic styles and topics in our sample: established partisans, negative partisans, and emergent right-wing populists. These frames play out in the production, dissemination, and discussion of memes about COVID-19. We find that despite early memes legitimizing coronavirus as a threat, negative partisans and emergent right-wing populists downplayed the pandemic by sharing misleading and conspiratorial information.

### **Memetic Production and Politics in Canada**

There is no consensus over what constitutes a meme but there is an agreement that memetic practices are intertwined with popular politics. To us, memes are “evolving tapestries of self-referential texts collectively created, circulated, and transformed by participants online” (Milner & Phillips, 2017: 30). Memes help solidify in-group and out-group identities through the common linguistic, aesthetic, and affective cues that necessarily exclude or even ridicule outsiders. This type of boundary enforcing logic, referred to as “lulz” by early meme-makers on image-sharing board 4Chan (Miltner, 2014), became endemic to wider internet and meme cultures. As specific groups and spaces crafted their own memetic sensibilities, memes become increasingly political through the niche humour, ideology, and messages they can provide. The racial and gender homogeneity enforced by the vitriol of early meme cultures ensured whiteness and maleness were defaults, to the violent exclusion of marginalized others (Phillips, 2019). In short, memes are not just silly internet humour; behind their simple graphics and relatable jokes, memes are actualized by various parties to tout specific ideologies and function as powerful tools to bolster engagement.

As digital content, meme production is no longer understood as just kids making GIFs, rather they are a central part of digital communication tied into larger practices and specific industries. Crystal Abidin (2020) has shown how meme cultures are related to larger influencer cultures where, “memes have also been studied as being ‘factoried’ in the sense of being systematically produced en masse and milked for commercial value, although not all meme factories may be monetized” (n.p.). Their staple-status within digital communication has allowed them to enact, what Joan Donovan (2019) alludes to as meme wars, a now, “consistent feature of our politics, [that are] not just being used by internet trolls or some bored kids in the basement, but by governments, political candidates, and activists across the globe” (n.p.). Memes are endemic to political and civil discourse as an individual and large-scale tool of information and ideological disclosure.

In Canada, partisan scenes -- or loose communities organized for or against political parties or party leaders -- are key sites of meme production (McKelvey et al., 2021). Scenes have primarily been discussed to reference participatory fan cultures within different musical spaces (Hesmondhalgh, 2005; Woo et al., 2015), however, our recent work has theorized the concept's value for digital meme communities (McKelvey et al., 2021). Our previous exploration of scenes was grounded in the politically charged space of the Canadian Election, where this study re-evaluates the term in these groups during an initially apolitical issue – the COVID-19 pandemic. Scenes have their own codes and in-jokes that resonate with what Abidin refers to as “refracted publics” which, arise from cultures of users who dog whistle (encoding a message to mean one thing to the general public with additional meaning for the target audience), adopt ‘parallel literacies’ (encoding a message to mean vastly different things for different target audiences...), and employ social steganography (hiding messages in plain sight...) (2021: 4).

In our previous case, our discussion of scenes recognized how they form around meme'd content. This inspired us to construct a methodology that conceptualizes how memes construct the boundaries of these scenes. For this paper, scenes guide our methodology by referring to the digital spaces that partisan groups take up - the social media grounded loci of conversation, content sharing, and, as we focus, memetic interaction.

Our analysis of memes relies on frame analysis as its key theoretical approach. Framing analysis is a “fractured paradigm” (Entman, 1993; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). We rely on more sociological and cultural approach to frames beginning with Ervin Goffman (1974). While initially unassuming, memes frame reality, making events legible by those who share them. This formation and maintenance rely on what Phillips and Milner (2021) describe as “deep memetic frames” or the affective paradigms we operate within. Phillips expanded on the concept, deep memetic frames are what we believe in our bones to be true about the world. [...] they shape how we see and what we know (or think we know) so completely that we probably don't even notice them. Whether we're aware of them or not, our frames take information and turn it into evidence. (2020: np.)

Phillips and Milner's “deep memetic frames” merge Goffman's (1974) frame analysis with more recent analysis of American-right wing culture and the use of what work construct the term by connecting Arlie Russell Hochschild's (2016) concept of deep stories. Phillips and Milner perceive memes as framing content that enforces and aligns with distinct worldviews

baked into individual and collective ideology. Deep memetic frames maintain collective worldviews through everyday acts of communication, or in our case making and sharing memes. As the digital allows for fragmented users to self-select their political audiences alongside the platform, the spread of these frames is bolstered through the unending churn of stabilizing and catalyzing cultural forces. While stabilizing forces are institutional, mainstream, and uphold the status quo, they necessarily come up against the vernacular and grassroots nature of the catalyzing forces (Phillips & Milner, 2021: 20-21), of which internet memes are an excellent example. Finding ways to bring these deep memetic frames to light can help researchers understand the worldview of online communities. We ground this fragmentation by studying the use of memes within partisan scenes to extract the deep memetic frames of these spaces. Our approach builds from these interpretations of content frames, where a recognition of memes and their scenes as a distinct space for study had us adjust traditional framing analysis into a meme-focused research method.

### **Meme Research Methods**

Since memes pre-date the Internet, our research situates itself in the field's digital turn in the early 2010's. Since then, the discipline has expanded rapidly and introduced several different approaches to the study of memes. Early studies, notably those by Shifman (2011, 2014) put forth close readings through trinary analysis of content, form, and stance of the memetic text as the foremost methodological approach. This approach foregrounds the individual text and, while some analytical attention may be paid to context, largely ignores the wider venues of circulation and relationship to other memes. In another methodological approach, scholars like Ross and Rivers (2019) employ Critical Discourse Analysis to study the intertextual nature of memes discussing climate change. While helpful in seeing how memes connect communities across the boundaries of a particular space, our focus is on the framing of content and, subsequently, community ideology.

Notably, meme studies have embraced existing qualitative and quantitative approaches. Quantitative approaches have focused on clustering large image sets based on visual similarity to establish such notions as meme families (Segev et al., 2015) and cross-platform spread (Zannettou et al., 2018). As Guenther et al. (2020) note in their quantitative content analysis of strategic frames, these approaches have focused on creating overarching categories from a large set of data. Guenther et al.'s study focused on one particular community, but what happens when we attempt to compare and contrast use across a few spaces, or in our case, scenes? We engage in this work from a cultural studies perspective, where qualitative approaches prove more influential for our purposes; especially in pulling out the particular frames that construct partisan scenes.

While textual and content analysis are adept at illuminating the function of individual meme instances, these types of studies have also given way to analyses of genre (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015), and aesthetics (Douglas, 2014). These methods typically do not evaluate datasets or corpi as large as studies using quantitative methods, however, this is by design. The value of localized approaches cannot be overstated once one understands the social function of memes as boundary enforcing artifacts. Consequently, group interviews have also been mobilized with great success by both Miltner (2014) and by Ask and Abidin (2018) to evaluate the social dynamics of meme enclaves online. Similarly, de Seta (2020) employs a methodological

approach to the study of digital folklore<sup>1</sup> that draws strongly from the social sciences in the pre-digital period. What becomes clear from these studies is that the interplay of the meme text, its venue of circulation (i.e., platform, scene), and the researcher's positionality inherently impact meme research.

Our approach balances these two approaches of reading memes by focusing on frames as inter-memetic discourses of interpretation, identification, and ideological orientation. A key contribution of this paper is its methodological approach. The goal of our data collection is to understand how the deep memetic frames within Canadian partisan scenes interpreted the pandemic. As memetic humour relies on context, we initially turned to Kozinet's (2010) work on netnography to help outline our process and ground the interaction with the loci of our approach. However, recognizing Costello et al.'s (2017) critique that netnography should be more engaged than many researchers employ it, we prioritized the researcher's observational portion of our work. Our goal was to observe, record, and evaluate the content and engagement with it in these groups, meaning we did not actively participate in the scenes of study. This decision allowed our work to focus on the boundaries set up in these scenes, reflect on the content and conversation in these publicly accessible spaces, and avoid some of the ethical quandaries that come with actively engaging within digital cultures.

Our decision to remain as lurkers rather than contributors to these spaces was a recognition of the content within our sample. We were particularly trying to witness how political views framed the pandemic through memes. Our goal was not to scrape these partisan spaces for a list of decontextualized memes, but to record and analyze a subset of memes over an extended duration of observation and reflection to understand the frames at work. Our method prioritized being in the space, tracking the actions and behaviours within the scenes, and reflecting on our observations. We recognize that other studies might engage with content and spaces that do not require the same trepidation for researcher involvement. In these cases, we encourage an adjustment of our method to reinclude more traditional aspects of netnography.

## **Methodology**

Our sample developed from an earlier project studying memes during the 2019 Canadian Federal election. At that time, we had identified which Facebook and Instagram groups were actively posting memes during the pandemic and translated that sample as a basis for this project. We revisited these spaces in April of 2020, to evaluate the frequency of their posts, the political nature (if any) of their content, and the number of users following the community. Our initial collection size focused on six communities from Facebook and five from Instagram. These included known sites associated with major parties as well as unaffiliated political sites. Canada has five main parties: the currently in power Liberal Party of Canada (LPC) and sitting opposition Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) typically govern. However, a series of minority governments allowed the social democratic New Democrat Party (NDP), regional Bloc Quebecois (BQ), and the Green Party of Canada (GPC) to gain more prominence and political sway. In the 2019 federal election, former Conservative cabinet minister Maxime Bernier founded a right-wing populist party, the People's Party of Canada (PPC), which attempted to pull support from far-right conservative voters. The PPC failed to secure any parliamentary seats during the election but has garnered support from far-right groups and engages heavily in anti-

government and conspiratorial comments. During collection we realized that our schedules allowed us to include additional communities, leading to final collection including eight from Facebook and six from Instagram with the breakdown found in Table 1. It should be noted that at the time of writing some of these pages and groups are no longer accessible on the platform.

Group Name	Platform	Number of Memes
Don't Drink the Canadian Cool Aid	Facebook	34
Justin Trudno	Facebook	14
Leftist Memes for New Democrat Teens	Facebook	73
Mad Max Bernier	Facebook	44
National Meme Board	Facebook	82
Niche Memes for Ontario Teens	Facebook	5
Team Scheer	Facebook	8
The Real BC Patriots	Facebook	47
Canadian Labour Institute	Instagram	14
Canadian Libertarians	Instagram	42
Honest Canadian	Instagram	11
Mister Facts	Instagram	10
North 99	Instagram	64
Tommy Danklas	Instagram	12

Table 1: List of sites observed in study and memes recorded for each

Collection started with what we knew; documented and recorded meme templates that we consolidated from the wiki-style meme archive and repository *knowyourmeme.com*. This guided our initial consideration of what constituted a meme. However, meme templates, while helpful, fail to consider the local or scene-specific memes being made. We adjusted our method to include a “meme identification pipeline” developed in a prior study of memes that distinguished memes from infographics and other visual cultures (McKelvey et al., 2021). While this pipeline was used to help us identify memes that had a partisan lens, we feel that it is transferable to other research projects. Our meme-identifying pipeline used a series of questions to guide our consideration of what might constitute a meme and allowed us to evaluate the variety of content and determine which posts were memes. This provided flexibility in the collection process by providing a less rigid delineation of what a meme might be. By the end of the collection period,

we had 307 memes recorded from Facebook and 153 from Instagram for a total of 460 unique memes. These memes were coded and analyzed, alongside our diaries, to observe the deep memetic frames that made up each of the scenes described below.

To collect this sample, researchers spent one hour on each page per week (9 weeks) and focused on scrolling back through the posts and comments that had been made on the community since the previous collection window. Research tracked how users engaged with material and what themes were prevalent in the memes and other content being shared. To help situate analysis and collection from these spaces, we incorporated Berg and Duvel's (2012) consideration of diary as method. We took observational notes that focused on the content being posted, the comments and conversation around the content, and the overall issues that seemed to be spotlighted. These diaries helped record our personal thoughts about each community space and expand on comments that seemed worthy of further discussion about potential frames at work. To maintain some consistency between the two researchers we divided our diaries into key sections: the overall issue being discussed, the format or template being used, how the audience is responding to the content, and our personal thoughts on the engagement. The average entry was about two pages long.

To provide further context in our entries we employed Stirling's (2016) suggestion of screenshots. These acted as visual aids and historical snapshots of content throughout the collection period. They were also an archive should the communities or platform be later deleted or remove content. This process provided visual and textual analysis alongside the personal and observational research. Screenshots aided researcher reflections on how the content was being employed and engaged with. To complement this, researchers also recorded a subset of memes into a spreadsheet, coding the issues that they discussed against an inductive codebook which evolved as the observation period progressed and included data such as the date, amount and types of interaction (likes/comments/shares), captions with the content, and if it was being shared from other sources in order to identify emergent frames found in the observational data.

Data collection started May 25 and ended August 1, 2020, providing us with 9 weeks of collection. Prior to the start of collection, we historically recorded page content back to when the first posts about the pandemic began to appear, the farthest back being February 18, 2020. To bolster this process and maintain data integrity, the research team met weekly to discuss their findings, reduce the fatigue and stress that accompanied data collection, and provide initial observational analysis. Meetings prioritized discussing comparisons and contrasts in the encountered content. This aided in our identification of partisan scenes and the larger memetic frames as it allowed us to see key themes and forms of engagement that governed different spaces.

### **Frame Analysis in Action: Partisan Reactions of COVID-19**

We feel the best way to further explain our methods is to showcase them. Our method focused on teasing out the deep memetic frames that constituted the three main partisan scenes we uncovered in our work. Through an examination of our notes, we witnessed how partisan frames maintain community boundaries through their presentation of COVID-19. Our method teased out distinct frames which were shared across the memes on various communities to

evaluate the larger worldviews that guided ideology within certain scenes. With the pandemic as backdrop, we will now elaborate on the three scenes and their memetic frames.

Memes were employed within these spaces to maintain respective worldviews by suggesting moral position and expected ideological stance. We found three kinds of frames at work in our sample:

1. *Established partisans* are those loyal to Canada's mainstream parties whose memes emulate party rhetoric. We were unable to find meme groups or pages for the GPC and BQ, so our sample consists of three larger Canadian political parties: the CPC (Political Right), LPC (Political center-left) and NDP (Political Left). These scenes embedded party values in their memetic frames.
2. *Negative partisans* are those that hold no specific support or affiliation to a party, instead they actively attack a specific party or individual. We borrow the term from the work of Caruana et al. (2015) who recognizes negative partisanship as individuals that focus their actions on the repulsion of a specific party or group. In our sample, these memetic frames focused on attacking sitting Prime Minister Justin Trudeau rather than render support to any party.
3. *Emergent right-wing populists* supporting the new anti-establishment PPC and libertarian politics. In Canada, as elsewhere, we have witnessed an increase in far- and extreme-right political action (Perry & Scrivens, 2016; Scrivens & Amarasingam, 2020). We observed communities best classified as right-wing populist marked by a skepticism of liberal institutions like the media, an antagonism to political elites and a sense of nationalism critical of multiculturalism and immigration (Wodak, 2015).

We refer to the communities that make up these scenes as partisan because they are not directly supported by a political party but are instead established and run by partisans generating user content around a political perspective. By acknowledging them as scenes, we are reaffirming that distinct ideological paradigms are framing behaviour within these digital spaces. In other words, we could place left and right leaning political pages together in a scene because their memetic frames of interaction are similar despite holding somewhat oppositional political views. By having our method focus on scenes rather than pages or groups, we were able to consider the dominant worldview that drove the production and engagement of content for a particular set of users. In the context of the pandemic, the visibility of political decisions and their impact on culture became increasingly apparent to audiences, where each scene distilled pandemic content through its frame.

### **Established Partisans**

Established partisans shared a similar memetic frame that interpreted and retold the pandemic through their party loyalty. Supporting mainstream political parties, these partisans interpreted the pandemic along party lines using known accessible (or normie) meme families such as the use of SpongeBob SquarePants in Figure 1. What we see here is party identity as a frame embedded in memes. Communities which backed the NDP's identity as Canada's social conscience made memes to call out the social injustices of the pandemic, such as unsafe working conditions, whereas the Liberal belief in being Canada's natural ruling party led to memes

criticizing the unprofessionalism of other parties. Pro-CPC pages used memes to critique media bias and attacked Canadian media entities (Figure 2), such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) a national public media body. They continually suggested that they held a liberal bias--an issue raised by then-newly-elected CPC leader Erin O'Toole (Platt, 2020). They also remained critical of Trudeau's leadership, while harkening appreciation back to former Conservative Prime Minister Steven Harper.



Figure (1): SpongeBob SquarePants Trickle Down Economics Meme highlighting the use of a mainstream meme template based on the television show SpongeBob SquarePants



Figure (2): Meme that presents the media in comparison to Previous Prime Minister Steven Harper and current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to argue for media bias

Importantly, we found no instances of disinformation or misinformation during our observations of pages and groups affiliated with mainstream parties. Instead, pro-LPC and pro-NDP communities attacked fringe, conspiratorial, and right-wing ideology all while displaying varying levels of support for government responses to the pandemic. Figure 3 uses a common meme template to highlight perceived hypocrisy or challenge ideological decisions. Posted by a pro-LPC page, it attacks anti-vaccination ideology and takes a stance against the consistently disproven claim that vaccines cause autism. In this way, these memetic frames policed the boundaries of acceptable politics based on mainstream party rhetoric.



Figure (3): Meme mocking conspiracy theories

Keeping with party lines, pandemic memes were also used to compare and take aim at other parties. It was common for pro-NDP to attack pro-LPC groups and pages, making claims about centrism or critiquing the work being done by the LPC and Justin Trudeau. These arguments were grounded around COVID-19 policy, specifically the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) that provided financial support to citizens during the pandemic (Harris, 2020). Figure 4 highlights this use. Posted during political conversations to terminate CERB at the summer's end, it frames Justin Trudeau as focused on helping the 1% and not actually caring about the Canadian poor. These “attack memes” further entrench party lines with users by establishing their political differences from others.

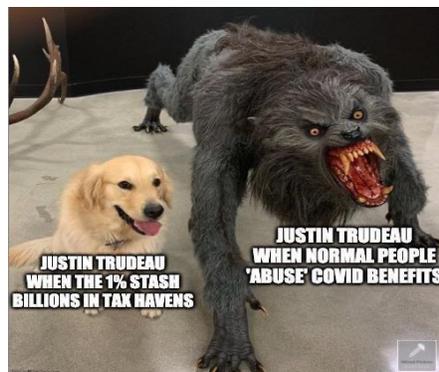


Figure (4): Meme critiquing the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit and the government reaction to people abusing the system for support

Beyond party support, all established partisans maintained a belief in the importance of following health and safety protocols. While pro-LPC and pro-NDP groups were active in posting health information memes, at the time of data collection pro-CPC groups never questioned the legitimacy of the pandemic or importance of wearing masks. Despite the variance in political perspective, established partisans employ memetic frames that match their own partisan rhetoric. Their use of memes, while making varied political ideological points, follows a similar goal- maintain party lines. Established partisan memetic frames reinforce political and moral boundaries for users.

### Negative Partisans

Negative partisans co-created memetic frames that moved away from party affiliation to aggressively attack Justin Trudeau. The pandemic provided new memetic fuel to further renounce the Liberal Prime Minister. Unlike established partisans, negative partisans perpetuated a memetic frame that showed no support to any party but continually bombarded the ruling party. Users engaged with their content from a variety of political perspectives, and the community's memetic frames provided an expectation of aggression and ridicule of the Canadian leader. Attacking the party, Figure 5 mocks CERB, repeating a common conservative framing of recipients of social assistance as undeserving or lazy (Redden, 2011) and Liberal policies as overly generous. Unlike the pro-CPC and pro-NDP memes, these critiques did not point to any other party or political ideology. They were simply attacks.



Figure (5): A negative partisan meme critiquing the Liberal government's pandemic response

More commonly on the page, COVID-19 was leveraged to attack a leader, which in our sample was Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. This is reflected in Figure 6 which depicts four images of the Prime Minister in various cultural garb, which the meme recontextualized towards the shopping restrictions introduced by stores during the early stages of the pandemic. In one image, Trudeau wears a ceremonial headdress bestowed to him by the Tsuut'ina First Nation (CBC, 2016). Below Trudeau appears in brownface, an infamous scandal from the last election. Even though these images depict markedly different moments of cultural sensitivity, the meme brings them together, suggesting that Trudeau likes to "dress up". That is the joke at least: Trudeau will wear anything to avoid rationing at Walmart. Schill (2012) describes this relationship between image

and political messaging as the implied function of visual arguments, where disconnected political ideas are brought together through visual rhetoric. In short, COVID-19 was another reason to dislike Trudeau.

Wal Mart: "Limit 2 per customer"

Me:



Figure (6): Recontextualized photos of Justin Trudeau

### Emergent Right-Wing Populists

Emergent right-wing populists focused on attacking the media and government while providing their own narrative. By populism, here we draw on Elena Block and Ralph Negrine who define a populist communication style as the use of:

identity, rhetoric, and the media effectively (a) to use and reinvent cultural symbols to construct collective identity; (b) to lead by communication through brutally antagonizing the elite and connecting with their publics (the disenfranchised or discontented with middle-ground politics) by skillfully using abrasive but also colloquial, relatable, patriotic rhetoric; and (c) to create ongoing controversy and to become media events themselves via a strategic use of all forms of media.

(2017: 189)

In keeping with a style premising on elite antagonism, memes called out the media as biased “leftist propaganda”, promoted alternative news outlets, and began to create and share conspiratorial narratives. The pandemic helped backdrop these claims and a chance to reinvent the pandemic as something other than a health emergency. Initially, upon COVID-19’s arrival to Canada in late February, the groups and pages showed some concern for the pandemic, however, as it continued to batter Canadian society, the pandemic was rearticulated as overhyped by the media and was reframed towards ongoing worries about the economy and government power. While these concerns might be valid, they were quickly coupled with posts or memes that questioned the legitimacy of the press and subsequently downplayed concern for COVID-19. Conspiracy theories and misleading information in these groups grew in prominence as stay-at-home orders continued (as seen in Figure 7 and Figure 8).



Figure (7): Using an image of the news crew to argue for media spin during the pandemic



Figure (8): A memetic template meant to draw false comparisons and spread disinformation about COVID-19

Skepticism towards the pandemic became more apparent in our sample further into the summer. Alongside emergent right-wing populists, negative partisans also shared misleading and confusing memes about government actions and intentions. Both adopted a more skeptical stance to stay-home orders and the virus itself. This was in line with their attitude towards prior issues like climate change and the sincerity of activist Greta Thunberg, which still arose in this sample. Critically, across all three deep memetic frames, conspiracies *only* appeared from the emergent right-wing populists in our sample. We did not find similar claims from pro-CPC, pro-LPC or pro-NDP spaces. In fact, a few of the memes on the pro-NDP page included citations in the post for user reference, and some pro-LPC pages consistently mocked conspiratorial content. Since

we did not specifically search for misleading information, we did not actively fact check the memes.



Figure (9): Example of meme undermining media trust

As the above memes show, these communities draw on long-standing skepticism of public institutions and the media. For instance, the upper panel of Figure 9 references a scene from “The Matrix” where individuals are offered a red or blue pill, a popular right-wing reference that has been recently picked up by pro-PPC groups around making themselves “aware” of “mainstream media lies”. This is juxtaposed with a lower panel image of Michael Scott, a protagonist from the sitcom “The Office”, whose characteristic buffoonery is meant to support the meme’s overall message. Unlike the other scenes, emergent right wing populist memes focused on anti-establishment frames and re-orienting content around their own political rhetoric which pushed against mainstream party discourse. While some made occasional reference to the CPC leadership race (which was ongoing at the time of collection), unlike established partisans, they intentionally moved away from party lines to maintain a frame of skepticism in their content.

## Discussion of Method

As the above results show, the method was effective at breaking down specific partisan scenes to explore the ideological frames they used during the pandemic. Our approach was able to establish three specific meme scenes within the online Canadian political sphere. Each scene has its own memetic frames that help conceptualize a relationship between politics and pandemic for its audience. Established partisans use party lines as the basis for discourse, matching their memes with party talking points. Negative partisans focus less on party politics. Rather, they aggressively attack Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s character instead of his party or their policies. Finally, emergent right-wing populists hold memetic frames of skepticism and anti-establishment sentiment where their memes question and present alternate arguments towards mainstream rhetoric.

The use of journals and team meetings were pivotal to this methodology's success. Research journals provide a summary of each researched space and over time this documentation

illuminated recurring discourse within these meme pages which was foundational in conceptualizing the three scenes discussed in this paper. Team meetings became a space to question the content we were finding on the pages while allowing for discussion of the challenges and specific or troubling memes we came across.

Most critical to this method was its ability to study community discourse over time. By scrolling through pages and reading comments on posts, we can evaluate how content was being engaged with and addressed. We did not specifically code user comments, rather we recorded page sentiment and discussion around memes within our specific journals. While this could be seen as a limitation of this study, and future work could look to record comments, we felt that the time it would take to individually record each comment took away from our analysis that attempted to understand the communities holistically. Focusing on providing an overview in our journals, with the occasional reference to specific comments that stood out, our approach allowed us to spend more time reading the discussions that memes provided.

These findings suggest that the method offers value at offsetting the loss of contextualization created through quantitative approaches. Our approach led to a smaller sample size, which allowed for a robust focus on specific meme spaces and how they are being used to embed politics and culture.

### **Limitations, Challenges, and Future Directions**

Like any approach, this method was not without its challenges. By individually scrolling through and coding specific social media pages, our research framework had to consider researcher safety and data validation. The *Association of Internet Researchers* discusses the import of participant safety as well as that of researchers (Franzke et al., 2020). In our own approach we refrained from collecting the names of any individuals, instead focusing on the content, and referencing them as commenters or posters within our reflective journals. While this protected user identity, it did nothing to combat the researcher's challenge of reading through problematic and upsetting content.

Sifting through a series of these comments on a variety of issues can quickly become challenging and overwhelming for a researcher, which makes it critical that we develop tools to help researchers talk through and work out these challenges. While some scholars have been vocal in this need (Ashe et al., 2020; Kelley & Weaver, 2020), there is little work to date that reflects on the role of the researcher when studying groups that directly counter one's belief system and provides tangible options to use in practice. Brit Kelley and Stephanie Weaver (2020) argued that we need to revisit our ethics and focus on doing no harm for the subjects and the researcher. However, this raises the question of how do we manage being witnesses to harm of others on the platform?

In our own work, we considered how we could make this process easier for us as researchers. We used our weekly meetings as a time to debrief on the challenges and concerns we might be having. We also spent time discussing our options around reporting and evaluating, and each researcher set up collection practices that allowed them to engage with the material in more amenable ways (such as taking breaks in the work or looking at certain pages alongside

other pages to balance the content one is looking at). Especially for work that is highly subjective and focused on a specific collective, conducting ethnographic research means that we as researchers will face challenges in understanding and connecting with the group's ideas: challenges which are also furthered by the logistical constraints and questions that collection provokes.

A focused lens on these pages and their content also prompts questions around researcher intervention. Most evident within the Emergent Right-Wing Populists in our sample, it was not uncommon for researchers to find content that clearly infringed on community guidelines, could be considered hate speech, or were completely misleading. As a team, we contemplated our role as researchers in reporting content. Prior to starting our research, Facebook announced that it would be responding to Coronavirus misinformation by working with fact checkers (Corbin, 2020). While we recognized this, our indecision about reporting echoes concerns about the transparency of the reporting process. Opacity in moderation practices is characteristic of Facebook's approach to managing harmful content, maintaining a veil of supposed neutrality, which has been critiqued as embedded in the platform's business model (Gillespie, 2018). Sarah Myers West (2018) argues that content moderation on Facebook remains highly invisible both to reporters and reported. In many cases, submitted reports are handled by an AI, which leads to frustrations and confusion on the end of the human users. Within our own sample, general content was flagged as misinformation days after it is posted and is not removed. Rather, such posts stay up on the page but just receive a "cover" that informs users that the information is misleading (See Figure 10). On the reported side, many feel as if bans come as a surprise, while others report a lack of human interaction and engagement in the banning process. This makes dialogue around inappropriate content appear non-existent and the reporting process feel unrewarding for all involved parties.

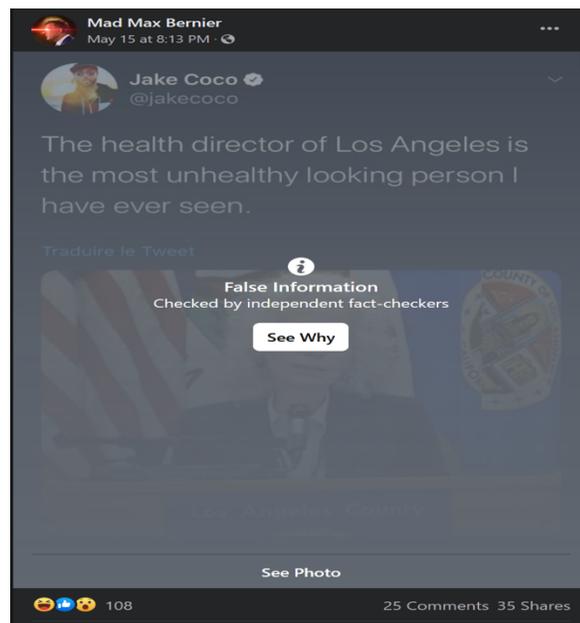


Figure (10): Highlighting the "cover" that is given to information that Facebook flags as incorrect

As researchers, we should consider our point of engagement with the data sample and contrast it with personal obligations to broader communities that harmful posts were attacking. Compounding this, Facebook has discussed its difficulty with reporting and flagging meme content (Statt, 2020) making our position even more important as we can scrutinize meme'd content more effectively than Facebook's bots. In the end, we felt that it was best to report content on the pages. While this might impact the communities we were studying, user reports helped offset the emotional challenges of studying the content. However, we recognize that reporting crosses a line that intervenes in the system, pushing the researcher past being just a lurker to an active participant. Whether crossing this line is justified raises a second concern about efficacy.

Is reporting the correct response to harmful speech? By reporting, researchers abide by Facebook's emergent and arguably constrained approach to its obligations as a platform. At a time when there are extensive debates about platform regulation, is reporting legitimating corporate regulation at the expense of research publicizing which advocates for broader media reforms? Neither question has a clear answer, and we recognize that this is a point for greater future discussion.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has outlined a qualitative meme methodology for studying partisan meme communities. Through a focused analysis on specific Facebook and Instagram groups over the course of 4 months to construct three partisan scenes within the Canadian online partisan space. We argue that a qualitative method for meme collection is a needed and beneficial approach to research that can explore deep memetic frames that maintain rhetoric in digital communities. Our methodology provides an attempt at studying deep memetic frames and highlights how qualitative approaches can help in our understanding of memes and their uses. Critical to this project's success was its focus on data collection and community discourse across weeks to construct an understanding of these deep memetic frames.

Our approach offers valuable insight into an understanding of deep memetic frames, while pointing to key challenges and limitations that future scholarship should address. Our methodological approach can be extended to a variety of other research avenues. The study of memes requires a particular attention to the contexts through which memes are employed. As meme researchers we should direct our attention to recognizing these frames and the scenes that they construct, by witnessing how the messages embedded in these memes would re-occur and create consistent engagement with the audience. We encourage others to employ our methodology elsewhere, to better understand the role that memes play within our ever-changing digital communities.

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